

If you hadn't seen the article below from the SF Chronicle, please review it now. This issue concerns us much more than Janet Jackson or Howard Stern. We believe the FCC and Michael Powell should be more concerned about the failure of the corporations that monopolize the "public" airwaves to deliver meaningful information on important topics.

Thank you.
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A serious failure of journalism
John McManus

What task could be more important to news media than preparing us for those few occasions when we, as voters, get to decide who will lead us and how we should spend (or mortgage) our common wealth? For San Francisco's three most popular television stations, the answer would be almost everything: Were Barry Bonds' home runs pumped up by steroids? A shooter on the loose on I-580. Reporters knock, knock knockin' on convicted sexual predator Cary Verse's door. Even the weather.

According to an analysis by my research team at Stanford University, in two of the three weeks before election day, KRON Channel 4, KGO Channel 7 and KPIX Channel 5 averaged one minute or less in their premiere evening newscasts on all candidates' positions and merits of various state and local ballot measures. All three stations ran more minutes of campaign ads than news voters could use in the booth on March 2.

My team examined every story in the most watched evening newscasts during the week before the election and the third week before the election, so we could see which media began the process of educating the public before the last minute. We wanted to know whether local stations would meet the five-minutes-per-night minimum of issue-oriented coverage recommended by a White House advisory panel led by Vice President Al Gore in 1998 and endorsed by other advocates of responsible journalism.

While Sen. John Kerry had all but wrapped up the Democratic presidential nomination by the time Californians voted, there were 65 ballot measures in play across the nine-county Bay Area served by San Francisco's stations, and scores of candidates vying for local, state and national offices. There was also the matter of \$27 billion in state bonds and an important question about how small a minority of legislators could block a state budget (Prop. 56). It's hard to imagine that even a few of these contests could be carefully explored in the one minute KRON spent, or the 46 seconds ABC-owned KGO allotted, or the 24 seconds CBS-owned KPIX devoted to all of them combined.

Let me be fair. These totals only include information that would help voters make decisions. There were additional seconds spent at each station on what's called "horse race" coverage -- who's ahead in the polls, what's their strategy, etc. Although even if these times were added, KGO still aired more political ads than campaign

coverage and no station even approached the five-minute minimum.

Does it matter that San Francisco's big three stations took the advice of consultants who say elections issues aren't visual or dramatic -- and thus unlikely to maximize audience -- and took a pass on the election? I think

it does for four reasons:

-- If there is a first commandment in the codes of journalism ethics it's this: The greatest obligation of journalism is not to enrich shareholders, but to empower citizens. That is why journalism is the only constitutionally protected business. At no time does this duty bind a news outlet more than during the weeks before a major election. San Francisco's big three are guilty of a deliberate and serious violation of journalism ethics.

-- Unlike newspapers, television stations are licensed to use public property -- the airwaves -- in return for public service. Because they are given broadcast spectrums that others, such as phone companies, must pay for, television stations receive a substantial public subsidy. They owe us.

-- Unlike newspapers, television stations earn a great deal of money from political advertising. Just during the newscasts we analyzed, KRON, KGO and KPIX aired 189 political advertising "spots." In 2002, campaigns spent \$34 million on advertising in the Bay Area TV market, according to the Alliance for Better Campaigns (www.bettercampaigns.org), a public-interest research organization in Washington. That's just the direct windfall. Political ads often bump up the price of other ads that compete for the limited number of spots during prime viewing hours. At least some of that infusion of political dollars ought to go to political coverage.

-- Television news has unique responsibilities because it reaches into homes that don't receive newspapers and illiteracy is no barrier.

Some would say television is unsuited to issues -- political or otherwise. Or that with a regional signal, covering a race in San Francisco wastes the time of viewers in Oakland or San Jose. But stations outside San Francisco, KTVU Channel 2 in Oakland and KNTV Channel 11 in San Jose, aired much more campaign-issue reporting -- three minutes and two

and a
half minutes, respectively, per newscast.

Politics may not be as exciting as hounding a former sexual predator from one city to the next, but as KNTV Vice President for News Jim Sanders put it: "Interesting sometimes has to give way to important. There are few issues that are more important to viewers than how their tax dollars are being spent."

As for politics being local, the four state propositions were important across the Bay Area. Further, every event deemed newsworthy -- every accident, fire and act of violence -- happens in a particular place, and most affect only a tiny fraction of viewers in a broadcast radius that stretches from Santa Rosa to Davis to Gilroy.

When news media distract us from our most important task as citizens -- casting an informed vote -- rather than excite, involve and inform us, they don't just fall short of the mark. They frustrate the primary purpose of journalism. They undermine what has always been democracy's most vulnerable strut -- the limited time and interest citizens have in participating in their own government.

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